



For Immediate Release:
Nov. 22, 2011

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Environmental work decreases impact on Afghanistan's natural and cultural resources

Museums once brimming with finds from Buddhist, Hellenistic, Islamic and Prehistoric sites lay crumbled and empty; their valuable antiquities turning up in high-end art markets across Asia, Europe and the United States.

An environment once pristine and rich in biological diversity is now barren and supports little wildlife. Fertile valleys that once produced such large quantities of grain and fruit that the country was known as the "breadbasket of the Middle East," now can't feed many of its children.

Tragically, the combined pressures of warfare, civil disorder and drought have taken a major toll on Afghanistan's natural and cultural resources.

Exploitation of these resources saw some relief and improvement when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Afghanistan Engineer District-South, prompted by growing relevance of environmental considerations in military operations and the importance of soldier health, began conducting environmental site surveys in December 2009.

"Our role is to decrease the impact our projects may have on the natural and cultural resources of this country," said Heather Moncrief, an environmental specialist in the South District's Civil and Environmental Branch. "We find out what the property was like before we received it and make sure it's returned in the same shape."

From a 10-person patrol base to a 5,000-soldier Afghan National Army base, most land with U.S. real estate instruments is surveyed to determine if hazardous materials and natural or cultural resources are present – like mosques, graveyards, grazing land, or karbez (old underground irrigation systems used to get water to the valley).



While on a site visit to FOB Lagman in Zabul province, Heather Moncrief used an ammunition-box desk and a five-gallon bucket chair as the workstation in her bedroom. (USACE Photo/Michael Bell)

Very little information is available, so a lot of research is involved. Most determinations are made through interpretation of photos taken by site assessment contractors, aerial photos from GIS (geographic information system), and internet searches on nearby villages.

“We depend on a lot of information from the 1970s, when monuments and old fort locations were documented,” said Moncrief. A list of endangered species was issued by the Afghanistan government in 2009.

Although environmental considerations are secondary to wartime operational requirements, they’re important when safeguarding the health of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan personnel, minimizing costly and resource intensive environmental corrective actions, and facilitating timely base transfers to the Afghans.

“In short wars, we dig pits. We advance and retreat. Here, we’ve come and stayed ten years. Waste has built up,” said Michael Bell, an environmental specialist for the South District. “What are we going to do with the sewage? How are we going to compensate Afghans for the land we modified? We knock out an orchard; we have to put it back. One of my jobs is to determine what’s there and try to protect it.”

When conducting site surveys, Bell is conscious of the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. In addition to the environmental and legal liability, it’s important to him to avoid negative impacts like destroying mosques or areas of importance to Afghans. “The Taliban drew the world’s fury when they destroyed monuments in Bamiyan. We don’t want to be like them,” said Bell.

On one site, a bulldozer was destroying an ancient burial site to build a helicopter landing pad. The Afghan villagers were watching this happen. “We, USACE, intervened and asked them to get borrow material from somewhere else, and they did,” Bell said. “It wasn’t done on purpose, they just didn’t know.”

Forts, castles and burial sites dot Afghanistan’s landscape, added Bell. Some of them are more than 1,000 years old. When working in Qalat, at Camp Eagle or FOB Apache, an impressive hilltop fortress can be seen from all three locations. Armies under Alexander the Great, the legendary Greek conqueror, constructed it more than 2,000 years



After conducting an environmental site visit at FOB Mescall in Zabol province, Michael Bell awaits his ride back to the South District headquarters at Kandahar Airfield. Remnants of an ancient fort can be seen in the background. (Courtesy Photo)



Straight lines of circles with holes can be seen when flying into Kandahar Airfield. These circles are spoil piles developed over time from the maintenance of ancient Chinese irrigation tunnels called a Karbez, which are still in use today. They’re dug from a dry village to the base of mountains delivering snow melt. The spoil material is deposited by bucket from small men or boys who squeeze into vertical shafts to remove fill to maintain water flow. This system was so successful that Afghanistan was once considered the “breadbasket” of the Middle East. (USACE Photo/Brenda Beasley)

ago. Known to locals as “Ball Haizer,” the area has since been occupied by British, Russian, Taliban and now NATO and Afghan National Armies. “We’re protecting this important cultural resource,” Bell added.

Looting of cultural treasures is also a NATO concern. The National Museum of Afghanistan was destroyed by the Taliban and the antiquities were sold on the black market. “NATO is trying to help rebuild the museum and is buying back some of these items,” said Bell.

By identifying what’s there, the South District can possibly repair or replace it; however, some resources may be gone forever. “The Russians completely deforested an area in Herat, and that forest will not be coming back,” said Bell, an east Tennessee native and a regulatory appeals officer deployed from USACE South Atlantic Division.

One big environmental concern is disposal of waste from project sites to a wadi, a dry river bed. It may seem like a good idea until rain washes it away, and the untreated wastewater, sometimes containing fecal matter contaminates water sources. “You don’t know where it’s being disposed, and that’s a huge risk to natural resources,” said Moncrief, a Seattle native deployed from the USACE Alaska District.



Built more than 2,000 years ago, during his push to India, this fortress was considered a favorite by legendary conqueror and Greek military leader Alexander the Great. His army spent three years here while his troops fattened themselves from the “breadbasket” of the Middle East. (USACE Photo/Michael Bell)

Although her travels have taken her to the various sites throughout southern Afghanistan, what Moncrief finds most surprising is the similarities between Afghanistan and her Alaska work sites. “Even in Alaska, I travel in small aircraft to remote places without comforts, like electricity and water,” she said. “It surprised me how similar they are.”

Once site assessments are complete, the South District makes recommendations; however, only the environmental officer or the officer in charge at the site or forward operating base can make changes.

“We’re not the decision makers,” said Moncrief. “We’re the problem fixers.”

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